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## Omnibus: Precursor of Modern Television

Mary Beth Hinton  
*Syracuse University*

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# Omnibus: Precursor of Modern Television

BY MARY BETH HINTON

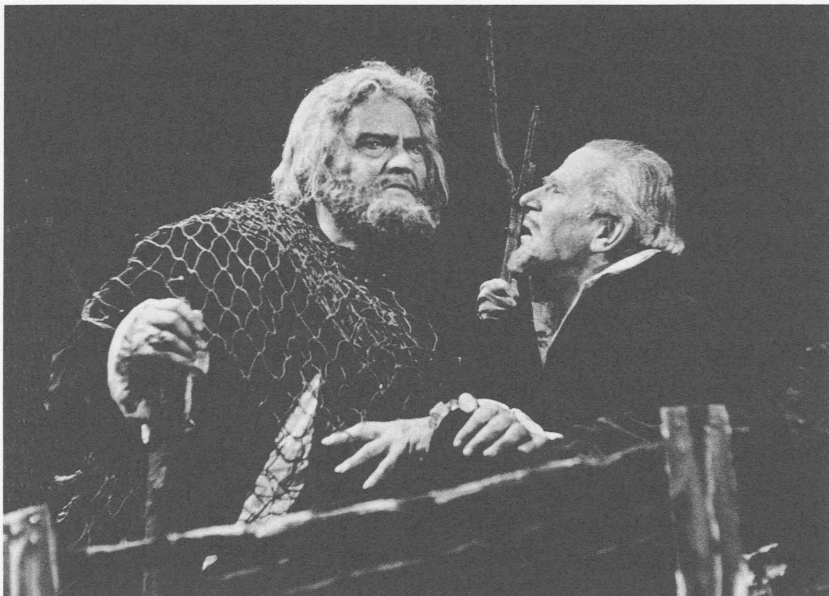
*In the early 1960s, Syracuse University unexpectedly acquired kinescope recordings of the "Omnibus" television series' first two seasons: 1952–53 and 1953–54. After the Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education dissolved in 1961, their staff library was shipped here. As Professor Alexander Charters recalls, "The Fund sent a truck to Syracuse with all their files and furniture—even the pencil sharpeners off the walls. On the truck were the kinescopes". Staff from the former Department of Radio-Television at the University's Newhouse School copied the kinescopes onto videotapes, which can be viewed in E. S. Bird Library's Media Services area or borrowed for classroom use.*

AT ITS 1951 annual meeting, the New York Zoological Society showed nature films. One was of a jack rabbit running in slow motion across an open field. As the animal bounded in an arc, the television series "Omnibus" was conceived in the mind of a viewer, Robert Saudek, who was to be the show's producer. "It was so startling and remarkable", recalled Mr. Saudek.<sup>1</sup> As a lover of nature, he admired the jack rabbit's muscular grace. But, more importantly, the image precipitated an imaginative leap for television.

"Omnibus" was, to use an expression current during the Golden Age of Television, a "window on the world", through which art, drama, music, dance, history, literature, science and technology, as well as athletics and comedy were brought into American homes by the gentlemanly and articulate host, Alistair Cooke. Between 1952 and 1961, "Omnibus", in seeking new ways to inform and to uplift, expanded the repertoire of television and stimulated the American public's appetite for 'cultural' programming.

The year before "Omnibus" appeared, the Ford Foundation had established the Radio-Television Workshop and hired Mr. Saudek to direct it. Son of a classical musician who was also music director for a radio station, Robert Saudek naturally gravitated to broadcasting. Both as a Harvard undergraduate and a Duquesne University law student, he held part-time announcing jobs. Eventually he became vice president for public affairs at ABC Radio.

1. Robert Saudek, telephone interview with author, 30 November 1990. Unless otherwise stated, the comments of Robert Saudek are quoted from this interview.



Scene from *King Lear* with Orson Welles in the title role. © Roy Stevens.

The Foundation's goal, said Mr. Saudek, was to "influence this new medium on a national scale through commercial television . . . to raise the standard of quality for TV as it developed". Although there had been experiments in educational television (ETV), the Foundation chose to use commercial television, which was, and was expected to remain, primary.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1948, television had been a force to be reckoned with. That year saw a 4000 percent increase in ownership of television sets,<sup>3</sup> on which appeared westerns, quiz shows, situation comedies, movies, and variety shows, along with the occasional drama. As the television industry grew it became a target of public criticism. According to Lawrence Myers, former dean and professor emeritus of the Newhouse School, "The complaints were much like those we hear today—too much violence and sex, too many commercials".<sup>4</sup> To protect itself from govern-

2. Another factor may have been that no ETV channels were then available. Since 1948, there had been a freeze on the allocation of new television channels, which, as they proliferated, began to interfere with each other. The Federal Communications Commission needed time to consider how to avoid mass confusion and to devise a plan that would serve the best interests of the country.

3. By 1950 three million U.S. homes contained television sets; by 1957 that figure increased to forty million.

4. Lawrence Myers, interview with author, Syracuse, N.Y., 22 April 1992.

ment regulation, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters adopted a Television Code, which set standards of quality for television. Frank Sturcken, author of *Live Television*, wrote, "Such concern for the social effects of this mushrooming monster resulted in a Ford Foundation study and eventually the famous 'Omnibus' show."<sup>5</sup>

The Ford Foundation gave Robert Saudek an initial appropriation of \$1.2 million to carry out the Workshop's mission. Interestingly, he did not look to educational television for ideas:

I didn't think much of ETV because it was very academic, dry, and boring. I didn't see why television, a theatrical medium, should be so untheatrical or why education, which can be so exciting, should be reduced to grunt work.

Mr. Saudek spent six months casting about for an idea worthy of such a challenge, and talking it over with people he respected, especially journalist Walter Lippman and historian Alan Nevins.

Then he saw the jack rabbit. He imagined a program long enough to contain features as brief as the thirty-second jack rabbit film or as long as a play like *King Lear*. In those days, television, though still new, had already begun to fall into a rut of sameness and rigidity. Most programs lasted either thirty or sixty minutes, their content dictated by whatever formula had been deemed effective. "Omnibus" would last ninety minutes, and its content would vary.

The CBS television network agreed to carry the series on Sundays between 4:30 and 6:00 p.m., a time period called the 'intellectual ghetto', to which shows with limited audience appeal, like "Meet the Press", were relegated. "Omnibus" took in revenues from several commercial sponsors—or "subscribers", as Alistair Cooke called them—who promoted paper napkins, automobiles, electric shavers, and greeting cards, to name a few. However, because "Omnibus" was not dependent upon support from advertising, it had, unlike other programs, considerable artistic freedom. Commercial breaks fell between features, instead of interrupting them according to the clock; and if a sponsor did not like the content of a certain feature, "Omnibus" did not have to compromise because, regardless of the amount of support from sponsors, the Ford Foundation guaranteed to deliver twenty-six programs each season.

5. Frank Sturcken, *Live Television* (McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers, Jefferson, N.C. and London, 1990), 42.



"Omnibus" opened on Sunday, 9 November 1952. The New York *Times* reaction was as follows:

"Omnibus," the day after its opening, was the most discussed program in many a week, not because of any factor of sensationalism, but solely because it reflected a venturesome and adult spirit in the realm of the arts that acted like a heady wine on the viewer at home. . . . The most ambitious and successful segment no doubt was that devoted to "The Trial of Anne Boleyn" which Maxwell Anderson wrote especially for "Omnibus." With Rex Harrison and his wife, Lilli Palmer, giving magnificent portrayals as Henry VIII and Anne, the play in the literal sense had to do with adultery, a subject from which TV shies away in fear of perhaps receiving complaints from three listeners who won't buy a sponsor's product.<sup>6</sup>

During that first program there was also a play by William Saroyan, excerpts from *The Mikado*, and a prize-winning film entitled *The Witch Doctor* showing the primitive dance of the voodoo ritual.

George Heinemann, former vice president of NBC Television and a visiting professor at the Newhouse School, spoke of "Omnibus" as "the most talked-about broadcast series".<sup>7</sup> In his opinion, the television critics, who were intellectuals or academics, were "starved for some kind of information and proof that television could do some good instead of all the supposed damage they thought it was doing". Professor Heinemann found it interesting to see how "they tried everything"—all kinds of different formats—and "used Alistair Cooke to tie it all together. With his beautiful diction if it wasn't important it sounded important."

Alistair Cooke was one of the show's greatest assets. A correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* and a commentator on American affairs, Mr. Cooke, born in England, became an American citizen in 1941. In Mr. Saudek's words:

I was always pleased and proud that I spotted him as the kind of person who would be an excellent host, one of the masters of the English language in this century, urbane, witty, sophisticated—very different from the usual announcer.

Mary Ahern, one of the "Omnibus" feature editors, said that in choosing a host,

6. Jack Gould, "'Omnibus' Evaluated", New York *Times*, 16 November 1952.

7. George Heinemann, interview with author, Syracuse, New York, 29 October 1990.

Bob wanted somebody authentic, not somebody who would say words other people put into his mouth. It's extraordinary how Alistair could grasp the essence of any piece. He would analyze it, write about it himself, and memorize what he would say. He had the conviction of what he was talking about. He added greatly to the distinction of "Omnibus".<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Saudek's decisions about what to feature were based on what he himself had always wanted to know; and, according to Mary Ahern, he was "curious about everything". If the topics chosen for "Omnibus" features are any proof of this statement, Mr. Saudek and his like-minded team wondered, for example, how atoms are split, how T. S. Eliot influenced twentieth-century poetry, how time has been recorded through the ages, how forgeries in art can be detected, and how white mice and monkeys respond to space travel. During the show's first two seasons, some 250 features were presented. They were fresh, and diverse—obviously the products of an immensely inquisitive mind, like the mind of a child before it has learned to see through the filters of convention. Below is a selection of entries from the Bird Library's finding aid for "Omnibus":

PIANO AND PIANIST 14 min.

Alistair Cooke visits the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art to see and hear the oldest piano in the world, invented by Cristofori in 1721. Then, William Kapel plays a Steinway—a sonata by Cristofori, Chopin's "Nocturne in E Flat, Opus 55," and an arrangement of a traditional Argentinian folksong.

AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA 13 min.

John J. Audubon's illustrations are shown and commented upon by Alistair Cooke as he recounts highlights of the life of the world's finest painter of wild birds.

THE NEW YORK TIMES 39 min.

Alistair Cooke visits the central offices of the most comprehensive newspaper in the business as OMNIBUS documents the multiplicity of activities in preparing a morning edition. . . . Of most interest is the editors' daily news conference as they review significant news to be included. . . .

PAINTING TO MUSIC 7 min.

The Spanish artist Julio de Diego creates a painting to the music of de Falla's "Three-Cornered Hat."

8. Mary Ahern, telephone interview with author, 4 April, 1992.



- AZUMA KABUKI DANCERS & MUSICIANS** 17 min.  
This famed Japanese dancing group, during its first visit to the United States, performs several dances which trace the development of their art.
- THE BATTLER** 28 min.  
This story was written when the author, Ernest Hemingway, was preoccupied with loneliness, especially of inarticulate people. His lonely hero is a frightened punch-drunk boxer portrayed by Chester Morris. John Marriott plays Bugs, his friend, and Dick York is cast as Nick, the visitor to their campfire.
- ANIMATED GENESIS** 9 min.  
Host Alistair Cooke comments upon non-objective, abstract art and introduces an animated English-made abstract film dealing with cell division and genetics. The film employs some interesting animation effects.
- THE CORONATION CEREMONY** 20 min.  
Leo Genn narrates an official British film which traces the story of the 900-year-old coronation ceremony and outlines the ceremony to be performed on June 2, 1953, with Queen Elizabeth.
- BIOGRAPHY OF A FISH** 13 min.  
The stickleback fish has three long spines covered with needle-like points. This film shows the male preparing a nest, securing a mate, fertilizing the eggs, and protecting his brood. Interesting coverage of one of the few male species which [nurtures its] own kind. Produced by Sterling Films, Inc.
- FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT** 23 min.  
A model of the new H. C. Price Company Tower is illustrated as Alistair Cooke introduces its architect who comments upon the features of the building and of architecture in general—particularly in relation to democracy, human comfort and economy.
- THE INCOME TAX** 6 min.  
Alistair Cooke briefly covers the history of the income tax and traces the sophisticated methods employed in obtaining data, notwithstanding some wry comments.
- LORD BYRON'S LOVE LETTER** 23 min.  
A one-act play by Tennessee Williams. Ethel Barrymore, in her first dramatic television appearance, portrays a tragic woman who recalls with undue concern an alleged letter by the famed poet.

PETER FREUCHEN

9 min.

Alistair Cooke interviews the explorer-anthropologist concerning his life with the Eskimos in Thule, in northern Greenland. A film illustrates how an Eskimo builds an igloo.

SHOOT THE NETS

17 min.

This Dutch film won the Robert Flaherty Award for the best European documentary film in 1953. It traces the activities of Dutch herring fishermen as they bring in the first catch of the season. Produced and directed by Herman van der Horst.

SYMPHONY OF A CITY

11 min.

In producing this film impression of his city, Stockholm, Arne Sucksdorff states, "This film tries to avoid all that is quantity and mass about a city."

STORY OF JAZZ

28 min.

The various forms which make up jazz are skillfully portrayed by a variety of guest musicians. Well-known tunes are rendered in Ragtime, Dixieland, Boogie-Woogie, Swing, Bop, and finally in an all-out jam session. Guests include: Count Basie, Edmund Hall, Buck Clayton, Louis Belson, and Max Powell.

"It was always a challenge", said Mr. Saudek, "to find ways to do things better, more clearly and in simple enough terms". It was important, for example, to present a sophisticated idea in such a way that an unsophisticated audience could understand it:

—not to talk down to them or over their heads, not to go to the lowest common denominator. . . . The idea was to open windows for people—if they didn't know about Bach, that didn't bother me. Leonard Bernstein knew and he would be able to explain why he was great. . . . He showed how a theme in a Brahms symphony used the same notes as the Westminster chimes. Or how the death theme in *Carmen* used the same notes as the very cheery theme when she is about to appear. These were revelations. . . . I wanted to try to get the audience—an audience is a passive thing, generally speaking—I wanted to get them out of the bleachers and onto the field. You hope somewhere in the country a youngster who has heard Leonard Bernstein talk about jazz or Bach will be caught up by it and go on to become a good musician and contribute something to the cultural life of the land.

Early television naturally tended to follow in the groove of radio. But “Omnibus” introduced many things that would not have worked on radio:

Kenneth Clark, the English art historian, was on “Omnibus” years before his popular television series “Civilization” came along. He discussed paintings and sculpture on TV. . . . We did a series—one of the first television mini-series—on Abe Lincoln’s early years. It was written by James Agee [who had been Mr. Saudek’s college roommate] and filmed in Lincoln territory in Kentucky. . . . We went to The Cloisters for a Christmas production of *The Second Shepherd’s Play* in that medieval setting; and to an ocean-going vessel for a melodrama of the sea. . . . These were fresh new TV ideas.

New techniques and new visual effects were always being tried on “Omnibus”. For instance, in a 1953 feature entitled “Barn Dance”, Canadian cinematographer Ernest Reid used time-lapse motion picture photography to portray a ‘hoedown’ in which the barn and the cows and the pitchforks all appear to dance. A 1954 sequence with Jacques Cousteau illustrated the use of one new technology—underwater exploration—by means of another new technology—underwater photography. (The jack rabbit film had appeared in 1952.)

Like other programs in that era, “Omnibus” was aired live. In a *TV Guide* article Mr. Saudek wrote:

There was an undeniable urgency about big live shows that seemed to bring people ‘up for performance’ in a way that the leisurely pace of filming and taping no longer demands. [It was] like running five Broadway openings every week.<sup>9</sup>

“Omnibus” turned the intellectual ghetto of Sunday afternoons into a garden. It captured a substantial audience, as evidenced by Nielson ratings of 30, which is high even for today. Mr. Saudek recalled a survey conducted for them by a professor from Yale. This professor telephoned people in a representative town and asked them to list half a dozen programs that they had seen within the last three months, and to say what incidents from them they could recall. Many people remembered when Lucy on “I love Lucy” had a baby and when Edward R. Murrow vis-

9. Robert Saudek, “Looking Back at Omnibus—a Landmark in TV”, *TV Guide*, (11–17 August 1973), 22.



Alistair Cooke, host of the Omnibus show. © Roy Stevens.

ited the troops in Korea. They also remembered something from every “Omnibus” show going back thirteen weeks. It had made a deep impression, not a passing impression.

In some quarters “Omnibus” was considered a ‘highbrow’ program: one would prefer to be seen as a watcher of “Omnibus” than, like the man in the following anecdote from the book *About Television*, a watcher of westerns:

A famous New Yorker cartoon in the 1950s showed a man telling a telephone he was watching “Omnibus” (the Ford Foundation’s first effort at high-prestige programming) while the screen behind him showed men on horses firing guns at each other.<sup>10</sup>

However, Mr. Saudek seemed to dislike implications that “Omnibus” was in any way elite. In response to the question whether “Omnibus” was ‘cultural’, he replied,

10. Martin Mayer, *About Television* (Harper & Row, 1972), 36.

Cultural? Well, yes, if ‘culture’ is flexible enough to include S. J. Perelman’s tribute to burlesque with Bert Lahr, as well as other high jinks like football, race horses, Cousteau’s first TV appearance from beneath the briny, Gene Kelly, Hermione Gingold, Jack Benny and Nichols and May.”<sup>11</sup>

After four years on CBS, the program moved to ABC, where it ran on Sunday nights—prime time. This was not, according to Mr. Saudek, their “finest hour” because popular shows like Loretta Young’s captured much of the television audience. At the end of the fifth year, the Ford Foundation withdrew its support, not, as one might expect, because of the competition, but because of legal considerations: the Foundation was accused of providing free advertising, through “Omnibus”, for the Ford Motor Company and was thus in danger of losing its tax-exempt status. Robert Saudek Associates bought the rights to the show, and ran it successfully—again on Sunday afternoons—at a profit for three more years, this time on NBC. Finally, professional football took over Sunday afternoons, a development that spelled the demise of “Omnibus”.

According to the *New York Times Encyclopedia of Television*, during its first five years, the show took in \$5.5 million in advertising revenues, against \$8.5 million in expenses, with Ford making up the difference. “Omnibus” in its best days had been successful in attracting commercial sponsorship and a substantial audience. However, as television evolved it became clear that, if such programs were to survive, an alternative to commercial television would have to be developed.

“Omnibus” paved the way for public television by creating a new concept of educational programming. Robert Saudek demonstrated that, to be educational, television did not have to simulate a classroom, with teachers standing at blackboards. With enough money and talent behind it, the medium could be used not just to present information, but to create interest by offering content of high quality in a variety of formats.

In 1965 the Carnegie Corporation gathered some fifteen experts, among them Robert Saudek, to study the future of ETV. This group, called the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, conducted studies and met monthly for two years. The Commission then filed a report recommending that the government finance a public television service, and in 1967 this report was endorsed by President Lyndon Johnson and the United States Congress.

11. Saudek, “Looking Back”, 23.

One could argue that “Omnibus” influenced all of subsequent television, not just public television. Alistair Cooke wrote, “Looking back now, I marvel that so few of us thought up so many different and original features . . . so many sorts of television—in music, science, history, geography—so many ingenious ways of presenting them (apart from the dramas, which other people were doing) that there is practically nothing done on television today which was not anticipated by “Omnibus”.<sup>12</sup>

A recent article on “Omnibus” by Richard Krolik illustrates Mr. Cooke’s point:

We have “Sunday Morning” on CBS and “Sunday Today” on NBC, which may not present drama and music and dance and science and history the way Omnibus did, but which do report faithfully and entertainingly on those civilized essentials. . . . We have the whole panoply of public television programming. No less an authority than Ward Chamberlin, for twenty years head of WETA in Washington and a founder of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting says: “Omnibus showed that there was a real audience for cultural programming. . . .” And we have cable channels attempting the kind of programming “Omnibus” pioneered.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Myers, who has used the “Omnibus” tapes in his classes on educational broadcasting, said:

We used these programs as the grand example of experimentation. Some of them look amateurish now, but I found them useful for demonstrating that a lot of what we think is new on television today is not so new.

12. Alistair Cooke, letter to author, 20 November 1991.

13. Richard Krolik, “Television’s Adventure in Culture; The Story of Omnibus”, *Television Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1991): 10.